

TITLE: Writing Below PAR

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~~Confidential~~*Mangling the mother tongue*

Writing Below PAR

Carol Willett

In evaluating and ranking individual CIA officers stationed worldwide, Directorate of Operations' promotion panels rely heavily on written Performance Appraisal Reports (PARs). Promotion panels, which may have no direct knowledge of the individual in question, use PARs as the primary means to determine performance and potential relative to other officers at that grade. For this reason, each panel looks closely at the accuracy, tenor and scope of PARs.

PAR writers whose narrative fully and explicitly substantiates the grades assigned to measure performance are commended by evaluation panels. PAR writers whose language is vague, misleading, over-general or fails to address performance requirements are chastised and shown the error of their ways.

Because of the vast number of PARs reviewed by each panel, infelicitous phrases, malaprops, and mixed metaphors become collectors' items. The examples in this article are drawn from such collections. My occasional observations are in parentheses.

Some Worst Cases

"He managed to conduct a three-hour conversation in a language he had never spoken before." (A neat trick.)

"She is the shining light in the cemetery at night." (The gravedigger, perhaps?)

"The highlight of the period was Subject's tenacious pursuit of an elusive target which cannot further be identified."

"He merits an illegal but descriptive strong 6." (Notify the lawyers!)

"She is the cinderblock which holds this place together."

"Subject must stop trying to act as a male operative and instead capitalize on her advantages as a female in the same role." (Mata Hari lives!)

"On balance, Subject manages to break even."

"She is so good she must be an alien; she couldn't possibly be from planet Earth."

"She was born much too soon and is way ahead of her time; ergo, she is the best we could hope for!"

"This officer cannot be underrated."

"In addition to his strong performance, he manages to deal with the other vagrancies of the job." (A bummer.)

"He is one of a rare breed—a case officer who knows and understands his target." (What does this say about the rest of us?)

"Recently, he has encumbered some difficult cases."

"She is so good it's difficult to determine what she does best."

"I believe he can improve in each of his rated duties, but that this has been a very satisfying beginning which has pleased me, shows demonstrable strengths and fewer areas to develop, and which is a very sound base for the first full year of his tour." (Huh?)

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"While she readily seeks guidance herself, she rarely is at a loss for sound suggestions when doing so."

"His face-to-face dealings with ops personnel in another division frequently necessitate his making comments spontaneously, and he does this most competently." (No wires or strings?)

"Not to imply that she is without weaknesses, but I consider it a strength that she will let you know right off the bat when something is outside her ken."

"She is totally reliable, consistently does more than the job calls for and does it all with a smile on her face." (Let a smile be your umbrella!)

"He could use a tad more patience in his relations with those of his station colleagues who on occasion have different opinions."

"The rotating technical referent position has spun off to another employee." (Whirling dervishes wanted!)

"She frequently displayed good managerial behavior."

"She has an unusually close relationship with the Station's main liaison contact." (Some things are best left unsaid.)

"She never asks her subordinates to do what she is willing to do." (And what is she not willing to do?)

"Subject's new role placed her squarely in the path of incensed analysts and supervisors, any one of whom could have made a powerful enemy." (Were they armed?)

"... has valiantly battled the impossible and has plied the waves of paper, bureaucracy and the halls of HQS." (In a boat?)

"... retrieves highly sensitive and sometimes volatile records."

"She does not flap."

"When he stubbed his toe, he recovered with grace." (Yes, but can he do the work?)

"... displays strong interpersonal skills interfacing with colleagues and a savvy understanding of the season." (Plays well with others and knows that it's winter.)

"Subject bore the brunt of their passions with equanimity." (By thinking of England?)

"This is a truly remarkable quality for an officer of his vintage." (Yes, but does he have a full bouquet?)

"... acted as den mother to four CTs."

"... a special TDY team tackled and recruited this target." (Drafted from the Redskins?)

"We will miss her bubbly, lilting laugh and fierce loyalty."

"In the best sense of the word, he is a hustler."

"This officer has manifested all the qualities of native intelligence." (How about foreign intelligence?)

"Frequent travel enabled her sharply to detail the synergistic relationship which has developed over the years."

"Subject is a joy to supervise because he requires no supervision." (The ideal employee.)

"He has a definite military bearing; tall, erect, polite and firm."

"He comes to work to work and will continue to excel himself."

"She has launched herself on an accelerated trajectory of advancement." (But where will she come down?)

"She has become a multitalented, odd-job man." (A gender-bender.)

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"Subject spotted a trend of single females." (Also, a gaggle of geese and a pod of whales!)

"She contributes tremendous hours of uncompensated overtime."

The Last Word(s)

Finally, I offer this compendium of glittering generalities to avoid in writing PARs. Instead of using any of the below, just provide specific and pertinent examples.

"Subject demonstrated . . . sound judgment/accepted additional responsibility/is cost conscious/a team player/is talented/has excellent presence/is unfailingly helpful/can-do and prompt/steady/well organized/even tempered and tactful/has a keen intellect/is self-disciplined/works smoothly with her peers/is competent/determined/enthusiastic/cheerful/works with unabated enthusiasm/and indomitable energy/and is one of the few remaining fountains of institutional memory."

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